

# Grass-Fed Appeal

California-based Western Grasslands Beef offers flavorful red meat raised with Angus influence and conservation-minded methods.

by *Kiandra Gordon*

**A**s the cattle industry continues to move toward branded beef programs, a group of California producers is working to claim its stake in the market. Their approach, a grass-fed beef program called Western Grasslands Beef, is targeted to upscale West Coast restaurants and retailers.

Launched in 2002, the grass-fed beef quickly struck a popular chord with Bay Area consumers. "We have gotten a great response to our product," reports Darrell Wood, a fifth-generation cattleman who serves as president of Western Grasslands Beef.

Wood was involved in the company's start-up and says his motivation for the venture stems from wanting to create a viable future for the sixth generation on the family ranch.

"I have a son and a daughter who both want to be in the beef business someday," he says.

Wood explains that he began looking at niche marketing of grass-fed beef about two years ago. Through a mutual friend, Wood met Ernest Phinney, a California producer who had been marketing grass-fed beef from his own herd to friends and neighbors for about 10 years. The duo began to test-market grass-fed beef on a larger scale for about a

year and a half with some success. Then, in spring 2002, an article titled "Power Steer" was published in *The New York Times* promoting the benefits of grass-fed beef.

"With that great publicity, we've been able to really develop our grass-fed beef program," Wood says.

Phinney, who now serves as general manager of Western Grasslands Beef, agrees, saying, "It gave us a huge boost. We've still had to buck the traditional thinking that grain-fed is best, but we're growing steadily."

Today, Western Grasslands Beef can be found on the menus of several trendy restaurants and in retail markets in southern California. Its grass-fed beef was recently picked up by national distributor Sierra Meat Co. based in Reno, Nev. Although only a handful of producers supply cattle for the program, which is still considered small by the industry's packer powerhouse standards, the people involved in Western Grasslands Beef are enthusiastic about the future and are poised to grow.

## A bevy of benefits

Much of grass-fed beef's appeal among consumers stems from its health attributes. Research has shown that grass-fed beef contains high levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, which are thought to lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of some types of cancer. The beef has its own distinct flavor and is also lower in saturated fat and cholesterol than

conventional beef raised on grain.

Grass-fed beef is also considered supportive of sustainable and locally

raised agriculture — another selling point among consumers.

But Phinney points out that while all of these attributes may get consumers interested in trying grass-fed beef, it is the taste that will keep them asking for it. "Unless it's great-tasting, consumers aren't going to stay with it. That is why we've focused on developing superbly flavorful and tender grass-fed beef," he says.

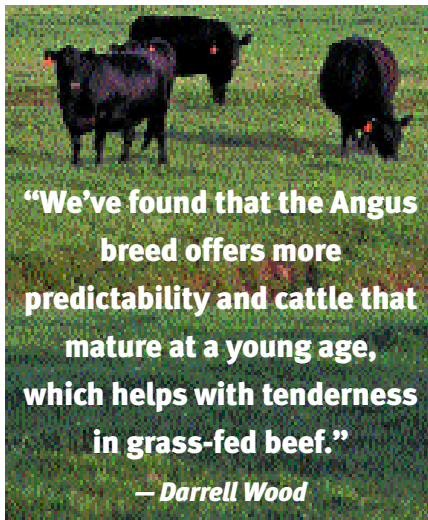
Currently, all of the cattle produced for the Western Grassland Beef program are raised on grass, and producers participating in the grass-fed beef program must be members of the Western Ranchers Beef Cooperative and follow its beef quality assurance (BQA), recordkeeping and vaccination protocols.

"The cooperative was started about eight years ago with the aim of helping producers market their cattle through video sales and value-added programs," explains Wood, who has also been involved in that effort since its start-up. Today, the Western Grasslands Beef venture gives the cooperative's 180-plus members another marketing outlet.

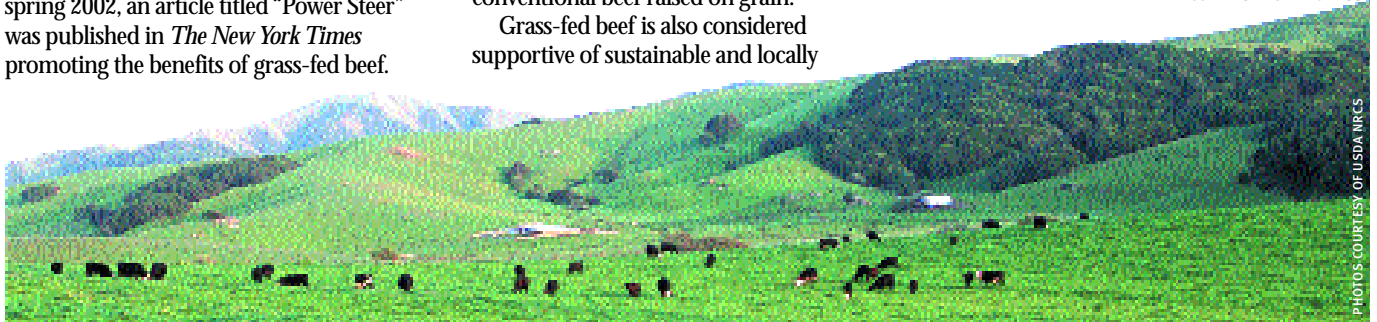
And because of the cooperative's stringent individual animal identification (ID) requirements, Western Grasslands Beef is able to select only animals for their program that are grass-fed, free of added hormones and antibiotics, as well as "Born And Raised In The USA."

Another focus of the Western Grassland Beef program is utilizing a majority of Angus or Angus-cross genetics. "We've found that the Angus breed offers more predictability and cattle that mature at a young age, which helps with tenderness in grass-fed beef. We are [harvesting] most

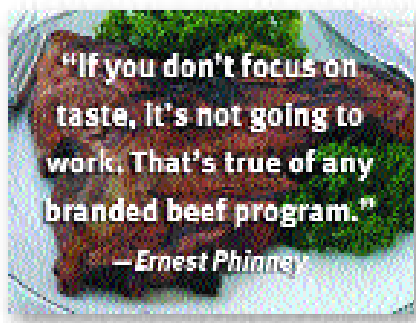
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**WESTERN  
Grasslands  
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PHOTOS: COURTESY OF USDA NRCS



of our cattle at 14 to 16 months of age, and it takes a genetically superior animal to do that," says Wood, who has raised Angus cattle much of his life.

"Genetics play an important role in producing a high-quality product from cattle finished on grass," Phinney adds. "We've learned that there are several breeds that work, and certain breeds that do not work for grass-fed beef. Angus is a breed that works well in our program." For instance,

genetics with high-marbling traits are sought so grass-fed beef will be tender and flavorful.

With production parameters in place, the final hurdle was ensuring a year-round supply, which is often a caveat for grass-fed programs. But Wood says that because of the variety of grazing lands and geography in the West, they're able to have cattle graze all year. "We've got calves being weaned at all times of the year," he says.

As a final measure, the cattle are fed chopped hay during the last month prior to harvest to make animals consistent, Wood explains. The cattle are then processed in central California.

### The next step

For Wood, the last two years have been a learning process. However, he is optimistic about the future. "It's pretty easy to raise the animals and have them processed. But it's a whole different world when marketing the actual beef," he says. "We knew we had a quality product, but it was breaking into the traditional meat retailers that was a challenge."

He says that initially they were able to team up with Green Leaf Produce Co., an upscale Bay Area food distributor with a network that put Western Grasslands Beef into 60 stores and restaurants. "The specialty restaurants liked us, and through them we were able to get our name out. People liked our product and began asking for it at other stores," he explains.

Phinney adds, "I firmly believe grass-fed beef is the wave of the future. For now it may be a niche, but it's going to be a bigger and bigger niche as time goes by. More people are increasingly looking for food with healthy attributes and naturally raised products. And, it's going to become even more economical to graze forages than to mechanically harvest grains. We are just at the beginning of grass-fed meats. Pork and chicken are also looking to grass-fed programs."

Wood anticipates that Western Grasslands Beef will be firmly established in the next six months, but he adds, "We want to be careful of how fast we grow. It is important that we maintain our supply, quality and consistency."

And, they'll focus on taste. "Our goal is to offer the best-tasting, most-tender, highest-quality grass-fed beef in the U.S.," Phinney says. "If you don't focus on taste, it's not going to work. That's true of any branded beef program."

